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The acrobat of the slopes

Iouri Podladtchikov is on first name terms with the American stars of snowboarding. The Zurich-based snowboarder – World Championship runner-up in the half-pipe – has consistently succeeded in accomplishing some of the most remarkable manoeuvres on the circuit. We met the circus acrobat of the slopes following his World Cup triumph in Saas-Fee.
By Alain Wey

Iouri Podladtchikov on the podium and in the half-pipe in Saas-Fee last November

He flies into the half-pipe, soaring over four metres above the 6.5-metre-high walls of snow. Phenomenal spins and perilous, jaw-dropping flips – it seems nothing can stop Iouri Podladtchikov. He won the World Cup event in Saas-Fee with panache and without excessive risk-taking. In the finish area he is all smiles, focussing on the television cameras. Podladtchikov is one of the few Europeans capable of competing with the giants of the sport from the USA like Shaun White who remains invincible. After the Olympic champion, he is only the second snowboarder to have landed the double McTwist 1260, which involves two flips and three and a half spins. The man nicknamed iPod has risen to fame throughout Switzerland after only missing out on a medal at the Vancouver Olympic Games by a few points. He also picked up a silver medal at the legendary North American Winter X-Games in 2010. At the Hôtel du Glacier in Saas-Fee, the 23-year-old snowboarder puts aside his boards and guitars for a moment to give us the opportunity to find out more about the man he is today.

Brother as a role model

Iouri arrived in Switzerland in 1996 at the age of eight. His family followed his father, a geophysics professor, who moved from Moscow to the Netherlands and then to Switzerland and Zurich, where he was a lecturer at the Federal Institute of Technology. Iouri recalls: "I started snowboarding at the age of 11 in Flumserberg. My older brother Igor was a very keen snowboarder and I always wanted to emulate him. I was already skateboarding so snowboarding was a natural step. It meant everything to us. I would go into the mountains every weekend with my parents and they allowed me to go on my own from the age of 13, mainly to Laax or Davos because, right from the start, I wanted to surf the pipes, jumps and rails." Iouri studied at the sports high school in Davos and became a Swiss citizen in 2007, just a year after taking part in the Turin Olympic Games in Russian colours while training in Grisons with his Swiss friends and coaches, Marco Bruni and Pepe Regazzi from Swiss Ski. "But I was always the Russian", he recalls.

When asked whether he feels more Russian or Swiss, Iouri sidesteps the question: "I hate that question, that's my answer!" he smiles. And what about in terms of his character and outlook? "I've experienced many different countries and I feel multicultural. But my parents are Russian, very Russian in fact. Perhaps my mindset is somewhat more Russian than that of my Swiss friends. But I'm not Russian in Russia and I'm not Swiss in Switzerland. That's how it is. At the end of the day, I'm Iouri and I'm not worried about anything else." And does Switzerland have a special place in his heart? "It represents a lot to me – the mountains, my friends, love and Zurich", he explains, with a glint in his eye. He adds: "Switzerland is wonderful." His home town also presented him with the title of "Sportsperson of the Year" in 2009.

Always focussed on a goal

What is a year in the life of Iouri like? He replies: "The first word that springs to mind is chaotic because I'm constantly travelling around the world. I'm not very good at settling down and not moving. I never get to spend more than four months a year in Switzerland. For example, I took part in competitions in New Zealand in August and then went back there in October for training." He is always on the go. "I'm very instinctive. I have very high expectations of myself and therefore also of others", he says. With a passion for photography, the guitar and skateboarding, he still dreams about winning competitions like the Winter X-Games and, of course, winning a medal at the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi in his native Russia. With so much creative talent, does he have a philosophy? "Not really, because things are constantly changing. I don't know what I'm going to be doing tomorrow. I simply concentrate on moving onwards and upwards, focussing on the goal in front of me."

ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"

Photo: FIS/Oliver Kraus